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M.P.

Common Sense about Colonies

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From

The Labour Publications Department,
Transport House,
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Common Sense About Colonies

In the House of Commons on December 7, 1938.

Mr. P. J. Noel-Baker, M.P., put the case for Labour's Colonial Policy.

He moved:

"*That, in the opinion of this House, no redistribution of Colonial or mandated territory should be made without the consent of the inhabitants; and that, as part of a general peace settlement, international agreements should be drawn up extending the application of the mandate system to all Colonial territories which are not ripe for self-government, providing equal economic opportunity in such territories for the nationals of all signatory Powers, and establishing as the primary purpose of Colonial policy the welfare and progress of the Native inhabitants.*"

The motion was defeated.

Mr. Noel-Baker said:—

THIS House has two constituencies—the 50,000,000 electors who send us here and nearly 70,000,000 in the dependent Empire over whom we also rule. We are ultimately responsible for the government of both, and to the latter task we give only a relatively small proportion of our parliamentary time. In consequence, every member could think of many Colonial questions which deserve debate and which he would like to see debated—The West Indies, the Protectorates, the Rhodesias and many more.

But I do not desire to raise any of these specific issues. I want to deal with Colonial policy in its broadest aspect as a factor in the international politics of the world, and, in particular, with the demand now made for Colonies by certain Governments, chief among them by Herr Hitler. I want to deal with the problem which that demand creates, and with the solution which we think that problem ought to have.

The International Situation

I start with the general observation about the international situation as it is to-day. I do not think that any member will dissent from the view that the most important single fact in international affairs at the present time is the general hatred of the idea of war. Indeed, I would venture the assertion that for the first time in history the vast majority of all human beings in all countries consciously detest the idea of war, and consciously desire that war should, by government action, be ended now for evermore.

Yet in the last few years three Governments have deliberately forced aggressive war upon their neighbours. And they have not only been guilty of aggression : they have glorified war as it has not been glorified for 1,500 years.

Every month they plunge deeper into power politics of the most ruthless kind. Every month they bring forward some new demand which can only be obtained by war or threat of war.

The spirit in which they act is shown by a message which the *Times* correspondent in Berlin sent as lately as Sunday last. He reported that the Reich Minister for Church Affairs had suspended from office and stopped the salaries of five members of the Confessional Movement's Provisional Administration, including the chairman. This was done, says the *Times* correspondent,

"On the ground that they acted politically by arranging prayer meetings for peace to be held on September 30."

In the face of such facts not even the most optimistic pacifist, not even, I believe, the Prime Minister himself, can doubt that these Governments have deliberately adopted a policy, the conscious aim of which has now become the creation of new military empires, and perhaps the military domination of the world.

Hitler's Claim Examined

It is in the light of these facts that all great questions of foreign policy must be now judged—among them, and not least among them, Herr Hitler's claim that the ex-German colonies should be returned.

What is Herr Hitler's claim ? On what ground of fact and argument has it been based ? What answer shall we give him? What alternative policy shall we offer if we refuse his claim? Those are the questions with which I want to deal.

What is his claim? He stated it with brutal frankness at Munich a few weeks ago, shortly after the Conference of Munich. Speaking

of the leaders of the democratic countries, the Prime Minister and M. Daladier, he said:—

"They talk of understanding. The word 'understanding' is somewhat incomprehensible to us, because we do not want anything from these men, except perhaps our colonies, which were taken from us on false pretences."

It is the claim that the ex-German colonies must be returned, all of them, without exception, without conditions, without the mandate system, and without delay.

By what arguments is this claim defended? By a great variety of contentions, some of them as old as Kaiser Wilhelm, and some of them quite new, contentions which taken together, would make it seem, if they were accepted, that a monstrous injustice had been done to the German people on legal, on ethnographic, on economic and on moral grounds.

Let me start with the argument from law. It has been stated thus by General Goering, who said a year ago:—

"Whether they like it or not the other Powers will be continually reminded by Germany that their method of Colonial robbery has no basis in any internationally ordered Statute. It is simply a system of illegal possession, repudiated by Germany now and in the future."

Much could be said on either side about the morality of the Allies' interpretations of the Fourteen Points in 1919, and particularly about their interpretation of Point 5, which dealt with Colonies; but the fact remains that by Article 119 of the Treaty of Versailles Germany "renounced in favour of the Principal Allied and Associated Powers all her rights and titles over her overseas possessions." And in law, whether we like it or not, and whether General Goering likes it or not, that Article is absolutely decisive.

I would add that it is not the invaders of Austria, nor the victors of Munich, who can safely challenge the morality on which that law is based.

I turn to the far more important argument about population, an argument which sometimes excites sympathy in our country and elsewhere. Herr Hitler tells us that Germany's "lebensraum," her living-room, is far too small. "Volk ohne raum" is in the forefront of his propaganda slogans. General Goering says that the German people will "suffocate" or "burst" unless they have their Colonies as an outlet for their surplus population.

Colonies and Population

The first point about that argument is that the rulers of Germany, like Signor Mussolini, are doing everything in their power artificially

to increase the population. They are doing so with one purpose in view—to increase the man-power which they hope to use in future wars. That is not an unjust interpretation of what they do; it is the boast they make themselves. We say that if such a policy is applied with such an object, it is no part of the duty of the peaceful world to provide colonial outlets in which that object can be achieved.

But what in fact have colonies got to do with growing population in the world in which we live to-day? Let me give the House some figures, some of which Mr. Amery has used before, but which, nevertheless, it may be useful to repeat. At the last census, according to the "Economist's" calculations, Germany had 140 inhabitants per square kilometre. We have 264, that is, there is nearly twice as great a pressure here in spite of the colonies which we possess.

Moreover, only one-tenth of Germany is uncultivable land, whereas one-fifth of our land cannot be cultivated. In spite of all our colonies, we have a net annual increment of population, due to the return of emigrants from Dominions overseas. Before the War Germany had an annual increase in population of 730,000. She had a total emigration of 25,000, but of these, according to the "Economist," the average emigration to the colonies in the last pre-war years was 33.

In 1913 the total number of all the Germans in the colonies, after 30 years of Empire, was 19,700, of whom more than 3,000 were German soldiers and police. The result of 30 years of colonial effort was that they had transplanted 1/37th of the annual increase in their population. In that year 1913 there were living and earning their bread on the Island of Manhattan alone three times more Germans than in the colonies.

The Economic Agreement

Germany is not a special case in this regard. The same is true of the Dutch, who over a century of history have had a net increment of population in Holland as a result of the colonies they control; and I think the explanation was given by a Frenchman, who once said that his Government extolled the glories of their African Empire, "and indeed," he added, "there is only one thing wrong with it; it is impossible to live there."

The basic truth is this. There are only tiny fractions of the countries which are called colonies to-day where it is possible, even if it were desirable, for Europeans to live and work. The conclusion is plain. The colonies have not the slightest real significance for the German people as an outlet for her growing population.

Is there more reality in the economic argument used. Dr. Goebbels has said that:

"It will not do that we continue to live as a poor country while the rest of the world is rolling in wealth. We are beggars; we are confronted with difficulties which we cannot overcome by interior methods."

Even Herr Hitler's Minister of Finance, who is relatively instructed in economic matters, has talked as if the return of colonies would help Germany to acquire her raw materials. What is the truth? Again statistics give the answer. In 1914 the imports from the colonies to Germany were only 0.5 per cent. of her total imports, or 10*s*. in £100. The proportion of her raw materials, was very small; indeed, the proportion even of those raw materials which the colonies produced, was only 3 per cent. And what were those raw materials? Dr. Goebbels has said that coal, iron, oil, cotton, copper, and rubber are the basic materials of modern industry. The ex-German colonies have no coal, no iron, no oil, no rubber, very little cotton and rather less copper.

The truth is that what are called colonies to-day are not an important source of raw materials for any nation.

As the League of Nations Commission on the subject reported in 1937, raw materials are found in sovereign countries and all the colonies in the world produce only 3 per cent. of the raw materials that are commercially important at the present time.

Moreover, the German Government forget that in virtually every raw material market they can now buy on equal terms, that the restrictions which have operated against them have been almost nil, and that by the strangest paradox in history—for myself I wish it had not been true—the other nations have not hampered them as to .001 per cent. in their buying of the supplies which they have needed for the monstrous armament expansion on which they are engaged.

Truth About Trade Equality

Is the case any stronger with regard to trade? In 1914 the German colonies took 0.6 per cent. of German exports, or 12*s*. in every £100. To-day no doubt their capacity is a little more, but if it has increased, it is entirely open to the Germans to take advantage of that increase.

Since Germany left the League of Nations, she has had no right to equal treatment in the mandated areas which she used to rule. But she has been given equal treatment all the same.

If those places were her colonies now, she might close them to other people's trade and gain a small increase in her own exports, but she

could do nothing in comparison with what she would lose by the reprisals of other nations in other markets on a larger scale.

The same conclusion is true of every economic aspect of this matter, and indeed it has been calculated by a committee of experts that if half the British colonies were handed over to Germany to-morrow, and if Germany did everything conceivable to increase their output in the German interest, it would add at the most only a few million pounds a year to the German national income. That would do nothing, or almost nothing, to help the German people to rise from the dire poverty in which so many of them live to-day. It is in quite a different direction that we and they must look for a solution.

The Question of "Moral Right"

I turn to the argument of moral right. Last year Herr von Ribbentrop declared that "Germany claims the right to colonial possessions on principle, for this is a right which belongs to every other nation, even to the smallest in the world." Herr Hitler supported this line of argument in a characteristic way not long ago at Munich, when he said:

"The white race is destined to rule. This is its unconscious urge, which arises from an heroic conception of life and which is entirely non-pacifist. By what right do nations possess colonies? By the right of taking them."

That is an argument of pure prestige. We are back once more to the conception of power as the measure of national greatness—power gained and used, in Herr Hitler's words "by naked force"; power over subject peoples, to do with them what they will. That conception has led to fantastic mathematical calculations in Germany. It is said that Britain has an Empire 105 times the size of the Mother Country, that the Dutch have an Empire 60 times the size of Holland, and the implication is that Holland has 60 times as much honour and respect from the world as Germany can expect.

We utterly reject such ideas. We reject them for our own nation or for any other. If the Dutch owe any element of their national greatness to their Colonial Empire, we think that it is due, not to the power they wield over 50,000,000 people, but to the generosity and humanity with which they have ruled those people, and to the service they have rendered to those people and to the world.

The idea that prestige is based on power, that power over subject peoples adds to national greatness, is part of the thinking of a bygone age. It is part of the thinking that our generation must destroy if we are to rid ourselves of the nightmare horrors of modern war.

Hitler's Racial Theories

Since, however, Herr Hitler does raise the question of prestige and of Germany's right to have these colonies without delay, there are other things that we must say. I have never argued, and I would never argue, that the Germans as a nation have proved themselves unfit to govern backward peoples. I do not forget the treatment of the Herreros in South-West Africa; I do not forget the suppression of the Maji-Maji rebellion in Tanganyika; I do not forget the fearful record of the man called in Germany "Hanging Peters."

But there is no colonial nation, we regret to say, that has not black stains upon its record. And I do not forget that "Hanging Peters" was dismissed by the Kaiser from his post; that Dernburg, Solf and Von Lettow-Vorbeck stood for a new and humane policy towards the natives; and that, as time went on, they seemed to be gaining the upper hand. But who believes that Herr Hitler would think of native rights and welfare, as Solf and Dernburg used to speak and think?

Herr Hitler's racial theories in themselves show that his Government and his party are utterly unfitted to be trusted with the fate of subject peoples.

It is true that he has promoted the Japanese to the rank of honorary Aryans; but by his personal conduct at the Olympic Games he has shown that he does not grant the same privilege to the negroes over whom he wants to rule.

A Decisive Argument

His treatment of the Jews is showing us to-day what weaker subject races might expect at his hands. Have members really grasped the significance of what he is doing to the Jews? All the Jews who are capable of manual labour, every man from 18 to 60, is in a concentration camp. Those men are not in concentration camps because any court has found them guilty. They are not there for a fixed or legal term. They are there, so it appears, for ever, or until they die; and they are dying very fast. They are engaged in forced labour of the most brutal and brutalising kind. That is slavery, and slavery more fearful than the world has ever known since the Roman galleys.

Is Europe which, half a century ago, in a Conference at Berlin, began to wipe out slavery in Africa, going to send back to Africa a government which has re-established slavery in the very heart of this Continent itself?

"rule out, once for all, the theory that the backward races are ever again to be regarded as a factor in the power politics of Europe."

We believe that that must be done ; that it can be done. But it can be done only by a great new start in colonial policy in which all nations must make what they call sacrifices. It can be done only if the false conceptions of the past are driven out by new conceptions founded in the realities of to-day.

It can be done only if the ideals of British colonial government at its best are, if I may use the phrase, sublimated in a modern, realistic, universal ideal of common service to mankind at large. We believe it can be done; but it will not be done unless we, as the greatest colonial Power, can prove that we no longer seek exclusive national advantage, economic, political or strategic, at the expense of other nations, from the colonies we hold.

We have to prove that we are in earnest when we say that we are trustees for these colonies. How can we prove that ? We say : only by offering to accept the application of the mandate system to our colonies.

Let the House observe the three conditions which we lay down. The first is that it does not apply to places where the inhabitants are ripe or almost ripe for self-government, and we exclude at once not only India, which is a Dominion, but Ceylon, the West Indies, and other places. Secondly, it is to apply to all colonies; all colonial Powers must play their part. Thirdly, it is to be part of a general peace settlement; it is part of the price which all nations must pay for peace. If we are to have peace we must have a change of international system; we cannot get it by staggering on from crisis to crisis as we are staggering to-day.

Return To International Law

But the new international system which is required can be built only on a return to international law; and it will succeed only if it removes some at least of the causes of war, and, among them, what I have called militarist imperialism. Some members may be ready to sacrifice colonies to Herr Hitler to-day without any solid guarantees of peace. Surely our plan is far safer than that? What is our plan? It is the acceptance of the three principles upon which the mandate system is based. Those three principles are these: first, that the progress and welfare of the native population must be the primary purpose of colonial government; second, that there shall be economic equality for all nations; and, third, that there shall be full publicity with regard to the administration.

But these are also the very principles of British colonial government on which our own statesmen have always boasted that their policy was based. The first has never been better stated than it was by the late Duke of Devonshire in 1923 in regard to Kenya. I do not propose to read the passage, but everyone will remember the declaration and how it placed the interests of the natives supreme above those of the settlers or anyone else. Can anyone doubt that it would be an advantage to us to have that principle embodied in an international obligation by which we should be bound? I am certain that it was an advantage to us in Tanganyika when we came to organise the government, and that it would be an advantage to us in the Rhodesias to-day. In any case, that principle, as far as we are concerned, is one which every British man or woman should be ready to accept.

No Exclusive National Advantage

The second principle is that the mandatory Power shall not seek to gain exclusive national advantage, economic or strategic. Again, is there any difficulty in accepting that? Already we have the open door with regard to 47,000,000 out of 68,000,000 people in our Colonial Empire. We have hardly any restrictions on the export of raw materials. There is some restriction with regard to public works, but can anybody doubt that it would be to our advantage to abolish these restrictions if we could get a general system of the kind I have described? It is 40 years since Mr. Joseph Chamberlain urged that we should do it in our own interest, and Lord Lugard urges it upon us, in our own interest, to-day.

Lastly, the mandate system is founded on the principle of full publicity through the Mandates Commission, the Council and the Assembly of the League. It is debate in this House, it is publicity, which is our only guarantee against abuse and maladministration in the colonial Empire; and we know that this guarantee works uncertainly and unevenly in many ways. Would it really be a disadvantage if it were supported by the additional international publicity of the machinery of the League? What that publicity may mean in practice has been best expressed by the greatest of our recent Governors, Sir Donald Cameron, who claims from his experience under mandate in Tanganyika that it was a great advantage to the Tanganyikan administration that "from the date of their foundation they had been exposed to the full glare of public opinion, which must be, and does act, as a stimulus and a corrective."

Certain it is that on the day in 1922, when the Bondelzwart massacres were debated in the Assembly of the League and the delegates from India and Haiti rose to plead, on equal terms, the cause of the coloured

peoples in subjection, something new was born in world affairs, something of infinite importance, and something I hope which will never die.

Lord Beaverbrook says that we want to break up the British Empire; give colonies to Hitler now and see how far and fast you go towards that end.

We believe that by our plan we shall preserve for ever, for ourselves and for mankind, everything in the British Empire of which we can be proud.

We want to extend the mandate system, because it has set a new standard of colonial ethics; because in practice it has proved an instrument by which justice and progress can be secured; and, above all, we want to extend it because we believe it will give the peoples, including the people of Germany, a new vision of what colonial trusteeship in our generation ought to mean.

The Path To Real Peace

We need that new vision, and we need it now. Our generation seems to be afflicted by a kind of curse. It can only think of its problems in terms of conflict; conflict between the interests of the white employer and his native labour; conflict between the interests of subject peoples and the nations who have them in their control; conflict between the colonial and the non-colonial Powers.

Can we not show that we in this House understand that the epoch of force and exploitation in colonial countries has long gone by; that it is in the interests of the white man, even in his long term economic interest, if he would only see it, that subject peoples shall be happy, prosperous and free; that it is in the interest of every nation to ensure that the rivalries of the past shall be ended now and for evermore?

I believe that the eyes of other Governments and peoples are on the House to-day. **If this motion were adopted, we might start a process by which, in due course, the curse of distorted thinking might be removed, by which the archaic policies of oppression and exploitation might be ended, and by which the nations might begin their long and painful journey back to peace.**

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From
The Labour Publications Dept.,
Transport House,
Smith Square, London, S.W.1

January, 1939.

Printed by the VICTORIA HOUSE PRINTING CO. LTD. (T.U. all Depts.), 55 and 57 Drury Lane
London, W.C.2 Nov., 1938.